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HISTORY AND ITS SOURCES

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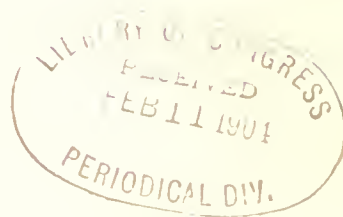
AT THE ANNUAL MEETING

MAY 5TH 1898

BY

JAMES CARSON BREVOORT

LECTURE IN HISTORY



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HISTORY AND ITS SOURCES.



It seems but yesterday, though really five years have since elapsed, when after a few preliminary meetings of a small number of gentlemen, who felt the need of an institution that would foster and develop a taste for art and learning in this city, the present Society was organized and planted in our midst. Long, we hope, may it flourish and increase in usefulness, more and more encouraged by all those who not content with that which is of to day only, delight to look on this world and its history, physical and spiritual, as a perfect whole—a changing scene of progress towards a consummation which we dimly perceive, and must all help in attaining.

The success which has attended the work that has been favored by your support and co-operation is most gratifying, and reflects honor on the fair city in which we live, and upon the country generally. That the originators of this Society were not mistaken in their views, may be seen in the valuable treasures of historical materials gathered in these rooms, and daily consulted by students from all parts of the United States—collections incomplete to be sure, but rapidly increasing both in varied interest and intrinsic worth.

Our departments of Art and Science are thriving and expanding, but require more room for their full development. The Natural History department has grown in importance, and the conchological collections of Mr. Pike have added much to its interest and beauty. The reverses, or rather checks to prosperity in the commercial world, during the past year, have affected us slightly, but not seriously. We shall gather new vigor with the general increase of business. The library has been largely augmented by purchase and donations. The meetings, at which a number of valuable and interesting papers were read, have been well attended.

The Manuscript department has been enriched by many additions, more especially by the valuable correspondence of Henry and John Laurens, of South Carolina, purchased and presented to the Society by some of its members. These interesting historical materials will in time be annotated and published by the Society. The first volume of our *Memoirs*, published a year ago, as announced at the last annual meeting, has been received by historical students as a most precious contribution to the records of the condition and manners of the people in Colonial times. A new volume will soon be put to press, containing all that is known concerning the battle of Long Island, and the occupation of Kings County by the British during the Revolutionary war, together with plans, views and a full documentary appendix, prepared by one of our members.

We have our general and special funds securely invested, and have paid two thirds of the purchase money due for the site of our permanent establishment, which amount has been contributed by a portion of our members. It will hardly be necessary for me to say that these large money collections were gathered by the untiring efforts of the Chairman of the Executive Committee, to whom we already owe so much in every way. The Society, without his personal labors to that end, would not now have a sustaining fund, nor perhaps any funds whatsoever. He possesses the happy secret of causing the wealthy to open their purses most liberally in a good cause, and of being able to state in their true light the claims of this Society upon our fellow citizens. We may well feel safe so long as we can rely on his zealous exertions in our behalf, and we owe him a debt of gratitude—nay, we owe him life itself, as a Society. His reward must be the consciousness of a deserved success, such as few can claim as the result of their labor.

A few words may not be inappropriate here, in regard to the objects which Historical Societies must strive to reach, and the efforts which are expected of them. Perhaps none of our members will ever write a history that will live a thousand years, but our Historical Society, zealously and carefully laboring, may in time amass invaluable materials which, while interesting and instructing us as we prosecute the work, will surely facilitate the composition of such a history at a future time.

History is an abstract and comprehensive term which does not admit of a satisfactory definition. Perhaps it may be considered as a "*record of man's struggles to attain a stable condition*," this condition being one that best ensures personal security and individual liberty to a whole community.

The study of history becomes then, in reality, the study of all that has any connection with the life of man on earth. It requires close familiarity with the political changes of each nation, including the influences which brought about such changes, the personal character of the leaders, and the relations with other peoples which led to any given result. A perpetual and all-pervading influence on the character and course of a race is the history of the race itself, its ethnology, its migrations and national characteristics.

A knowledge of its geographical situation and physical condition is also necessary, both of which have a silent but all-important effect on every group of individuals destined to increase and multiply into a nation.

The scientific progress of the people must be accurately studied, for its national prosperity will depend, in a great degree, upon its control of natural laws, and the intelligent use of material substances at its command.

The fine arts, as furnishing the measure of a nation's æsthetic tastes or of its material tendencies, with the refinements which their cultivation may develop, must

equally be the subject of careful and discriminating study. In certain cases the faculty of appreciating these arts seems to have a definite limit beyond which they become merely subservient to sensual gratification; while in a few cases the pursuit of them is a never ending one, and certifies to the possession of a superior and godlike sense that cannot be satisfied with anything less than perfection.

The literature of a race is at the same time the vehicle by which its history is transmitted, and the expression of its intellectual power, giving us a perfect insight into the workings of the mind and fancy of those by and for whom it is designed. Lastly, the philosophical and moral attainments of a race, calling forth, as they do, the highest powers of the mind to the statement and proof of abstract truths not evident to the material senses, but put forth with the hope of being universally accepted, will in the same degree call for the deepest research on the part of the historian who wishes to trace and record their influence on man's strivings to lead a pure and noble life. When the proud and complex systems of the ancient schools gave way to the heaven inspired and positive truths of the Deity revealing Himself in the form of a humble Galilean mechanic, all history was to be re-written in a new light, and by a new standard were all nations to be judged.

It would hardly be necessary here to dwell on instances that might illustrate the landmarks just glanced at,

and by which history must be written; for they must be acknowledged by all as essential, and more or less necessary to the completeness of any historical scheme or story.

But as no one mind can possibly grasp or contain all that is requisite to a full understanding of all these subjects—subjects that may be said to embrace all that man has ever done or thought—so it becomes a necessity that in our times, the history of each department of human knowledge should be separately studied by those best fitted for the special task. These histories, at the present day, are becoming more and more numerous and interesting. Memoirs and biographies have been published during the last century which would of themselves constitute a large library. Histories of detached subjects in arts, science and philosophy, have been prepared, that are deeply interesting to the inquiring scholar, and easily understood by the uninitiated.

Polite literature, as it is termed, though some of it is far from being *polished*, has grown with a weed-like growth, until it has become the mission of countless critics to devote their lives to the work of pointing out the good, or warning us against the indifferent and the bad productions which drop from the press like the meteors in the star-showers.

Fiction is sometimes historical in its tendency, and works of fiction would not be written unless they could

be sold to eager readers. Three nations have hitherto been the great producers of this class of works. Others are now trying to emulate the French, German and English writers. Danish, Russian and Spanish novels have appeared within a few years, and we may yet have Mexican novels, if that people would encourage tragic drama somewhat less.

Philosophies are again springing up; each century has its schools which gather in converts and live their day, exciting fierce discussion on their several systems and premises, that cannot, like the great truths of Christianity, be self-evident to all minds however constituted.

The great feature, however, of the present age—we may say of the present century—is the large and prominent place which is accorded to the exact and natural sciences. With a fast waning prejudice against scientists, the laws of nature and their action on matter are now being actively and closely inquired into by hosts of patient and competent observers.

One of the most interesting of these studies—Geology—must not be considered as more than in the infancy of its development, and its most accomplished votaries best know how much will have to be done before full reliance can be placed on the cosmical history of the earth, or of any part of it, as interpreted by them.

Even in Geometry, the oldest of all the so-called exact sciences, new truths are being constantly discovered, and

old errors exposed or corrected; while as an aid to all other researches its value is becoming more and more apparent.

Astronomy is attracting much attention, and is popularizing its great discoveries and eternal laws. The new and powerful instruments now constructed are opening a wide field of hitherto untried research, and the method of correcting instrumental errors, and of recording observations, is becoming a science in itself. A fine and powerful equatorial, constructed by Mr. Alvan G. Clark, has been recently placed in a thoroughly well-built private observatory in this city, and Brooklyn may now have an asteroid or a comet of its own, if we can earliest detect one in the stellar field.

The ever-increasing importance of science applied to the arts is daily becoming more obvious; but this progressive physical influence on our condition as a people is too extensive in its bearings to be here considered, and in its history and active encouragement belongs to us only until a society, specially interested in those subjects, can take charge of them exclusively. We have many valuable technological works in our library, from Scott Russell's Treatise on Ship-building, in three huge folios, to the little hand-books for the practical mechanic; but we cannot fill out the list of works really needed for the formation of even a moderately complete library of reference in these branches, and have not the room nor the

means that are requisite for their proper care, exhibition and use. Brooklyn, as a manufacturing city, ought to possess a Mechanics' Institute, with a library and museum, and the means can be found to establish one, if energetic efforts shall be directed to secure such an invaluable centre for the diffusion of practical science.

Associations for special inquiries can best sift out the truth from the chaff, encourage the beginner, and guide the veteran in the pursuit of science through all its varied applications; but as we here take charge of history in its widest sense only, we cannot pretend to furnish a complete library of reference to all the technical arts, but must endeavor simply to place on our shelves the best works which record their history and influence on the progress of mankind.

The records of the political changes and workings of our self-imposed government are peculiarly valuable, both as a guide to avoid that which has been already tried and as a landmark by which we may judge of our progress in the attainment of rational liberty of thought and action. We are a new people, but our history is a development of ideas that originated and were taught in the old world, and is, therefore, a corollary of the history of Europe.

The first settlers from Europe were led hither, some by the desire to secure toleration for their religious or political tenets, and some by the wish to better their condition.

All were successful in their object, but they found a continent before them, with savage nature and still more savage men to be subdued. The task seemed herculean, but the grateful and virgin earth rewarded them for their toil, and the red man disappeared before the advance of the plough.

The early colonial days were rough and trying, and there was little time and less ability to record what was done by the sturdy and hopeful colonists of these shores. The little they left, and the little that has been preserved as a record of those times, ought to be precious to us, and must be gathered by our Historical Societies, and treasured as carefully as were the brazen tables of Rome; but let us hope, without an ultimate fate, similar to theirs at the hands of the Goths.

Such materials consist of letters, journals, reports, church and village records, accounts, public and private, law papers, and indeed manuscripts of every kind that time has spared. Valuable too are the little ill-printed and worse spelled pamphlets, stained and dog's-eared, which may be hidden away in cupboards and garrets, with the continual risk of falling into the hands of the cook or the rag-picker. Finally, the early newspapers, which began to be printed when the want of them was felt, of a size and make-up that appear laughable when compared with our great daily sheets, exist in complete files only as rarities, and even single copies of them are always desirable in our collections.

All kinds of material are useful, and as our Librarian is the best judge of what is worth preserving, pray bring to him your bundles of old papers, manuscript and printed. He will promise to destroy all love letters and lame poetical effusions found among them, if not *historical* in their tendency.

The Revolutionary war, our lesser wars, and the late Civil war, must be illustrated by all the manuscript and printed materials that we can procure. The history of the first of these is just now becoming clear to us, and the last must wait until a patient Motley can, a hundred years hence, sit down and narrate with an unprejudiced pen its true causes and chief events.

Time is constantly revealing new material fit to illustrate history—letters, memoirs, and diaries—which, for one reason or another, have been withheld from perusal or publication, and which become accessible only when all the actors mentioned in them have passed away. All these details present, in a new light, circumstances and acts that had long been supposed to be incontrovertible, but which are explained away, or more clearly exposed by the fresh tide of truth thus passing over them. Sometimes centuries may roll away before the truth of historical events is finally settled beyond dispute.

The memoirs of Talleyrand, who died in 1839, are now, after the thirty years seclusion to which he had ordered them, to be given to the public, and will throw a whole flood of light on the history of his

time. The Duke of Wellington, in the same way, left material which excited much speculation among his contemporaries, and once, when questioned concerning his view of certain characters, his answer was: "When my papers are published, many statues will have to be taken down."

As a proof of the value of a carefully preserved scrap of manuscript in illustrating events of by-gone days, one or two instances that are near at hand may be interesting. Here is an old foolscap sheet, brown with age, written over in an uncouth, old-fashioned hand, and in great haste too, as a glance at it will show. It was written at Springfield, Mass., August 4, 1675, nearly two centuries ago, when that thriving city, now in the heart of New England, with railroads diverging from it to every point of the compass, was a frontier settlement, exposed to the attacks of hostile Indians, and inhabited by a few bold farmers. The Narragansetts of Rhode Island, under the leadership of Philip of Pokanoket, had been roused, in 1675, to commit many deeds of violence, and driven from their old haunts, were spreading terror among the inland frontier settlers. In the second year of this unexpected rising of the Aborigines, Major John Pynchon, son of one of the first Pilgrims, who was a settler in Springfield, and whose house was burned by the Indians a few days afterwards, wrote in haste to the magistrates of Connecticut for help. Here is the identical letter, preserved and re-

cently printed in the appendix to Mr. Drake's edition of Mather's Indian War :

SEP'D, Aug. 4, '75

HON. SRS.

Our Indians have now brought me news of a fight between Engl & Ind 2 d agone at Quabaug & about 11 Engl killed some houses burnt & all ye English got to one house &c : and just now about 4 of ye clock in ye afternoone Judah Trumble who went last night in ye night to Quabaug is returned. He went wh'in 40 Rod of ye houses, and discerned Coys house and barne burnt and saw 2 houses more burnt, saw one Indian with a gun, but noe English man. At this dismal sight he returned, & his horse Tying came in a foote very much spent. We are very Raw & our People of this Towne extreemly scattered so yt our owne Place needs all & how soone these Indians may be upon this Towne we know not. We earnestly request yt yo would Please to send what force yo may judge needfull either to release ye Engl yet left if any be alive at Quabaug, or to pursue these Indians. Speedy succor is necessary some Trusty Indians also to be joined may be good but noe delay prsent chase to be given to these Indians is absolutely necessary, & so it may be to long to stay for Indians unless 2 or 3 or 4

If it were possible to have ye forces here to morrow morning Mr Glover thinks at least 50 soldiers noe full least having to few a good pursuit be made of ym I shall not add but beg yor Spedyness ye Good Ld guide & undertake for us

Yor Ld offr & Serv't

JOHN PYNCHON :

The Ind discovered Trumble, & hid himselfe in ye bushes as Trumble says. Muskets are best & not Pistoles, so yt horse in any way of dragoons is most to be desyred.

These
For ye Honorable Govr
& Magistrate or to ye
First Magistte in Conecti
cott Collony : at Windsor or Hartford
Post hast
For speciall service
whout delay.

The brave Colonel's house, not the one "with the seven gables," was the one in which the English had taken refuge, and we can imagine the anxious days spent by the helpless women and children gathered within its walls, the flying reports brought to it of Indian outrages, the slow hours of agony endured by its inmates, until the dark cloud of fear was dispersed. But here our records fail, and the framework furnished by the little we have of fact must be filled in by the sympathetic heart, which can imagine itself placed in like circumstances.

Here is another piece of manuscript. It was signed by the daring Naval commander who first carried the flag of the United Colonies, (thirteen stripes only, with a rattle-snake on them, and the motto, "*Do not tread on me*,") around the whole of Great Britain. In 1778 he had with the *Ranger*, an eighteen gun ship, captured the *Drake*, of twenty guns, in the Irish Channel, and, by his daring feats, had alarmed the coasts within his reach. It was during this cruise that his sailors took Lord Selkirk's silver at St. Mary's Isle, which was purchased from them by their commander, who returned it, accompanied by the well-known letter to Lady Selkirk.

In 1779 he sailed from Brest with a squadron of five small vessels, which had been mostly equipped by the help of France, then about to come to our aid in the struggle with the mother country, and passing around Scotland, where he attempted to make a descent near Edinburgh,

he attacked, on the 23d of Sept., 1779, the *Scraps*, Capt. Pearson, which with another vessel was conveying the Baltic fleet homewards. With the *Bon Homme Richard*, he engaged the *Scraps* near Flamborough Head, and fought that naval battle which proved that American sailors were equal to their British foemen, in pluck and endurance. The *Scraps* surrendered after a murderous contest, lasting from half past seven to half past twelve at night, within sight of the English coast, and was taken possession of by the American, whose vessel sank within a few hours after. Making his way, in a crippled condition, into the *Zuyder Zee*, he anchored off the Texel, and refitted his squadron. While thus occupied, the English Minister in Holland persuaded the Dutch to oppose this being done in a neutral port. The Dutch Admiral had notified the American Commodore accordingly, but the French Minister furnished the gallant and victorious hero, the fame of whose exploits was ringing throughout Europe, with a false French commission, and the following memorandum which I now read in an English version :

Mons. le Commodore Paul Jones will state to Mons. le Vice-Admiral Reyn that, although as an American he had only used the commission of the United States, it was not the less true that he had a French one, which was lost at the time of the sinking of the *Bon Homme Richard*, and of which the document now sent to him is a copy. Mons. le Commodore Paul Jones will even make this declaration in writing, and will sign it in case Mons. le Vice-Admiral should require it.

Below this hint at a sneaking way of avoiding embarrassment and delay, and penned in a large and clear hand, is the following memorandum :

N. B. The above is the proposition that was given me in writing, the 13th December, 1779, on board the frigate *Alliance*, at the Texel, by M. le Chevalier de Lironcourt, to induce me to say and sign a falsehood.

PAUL JONES.

This paper, labelled No. 7 merely, was filed away among Jones' papers, and was not published until Sherburne copied it in the second edition of his life of Jones, appearing in 1851. It shows the man's whole character in one terse paragraph. Chivalric, honest and fearless, he scorned a subterfuge, and a few days afterwards he sailed boldly out of the roads, and sought his foes again, passing through the English channel, exercising his men in gun practice close to the channel coasts of England; but cruising in vain, so far as glory was concerned, he captured several prizes and entered Corunna.

When Jones heard that Captain Richard Pearson had been knighted for the gallant defence he had made in the *Scrapis*, he observed: "Well, he deserved it, and should I have the good fortune to fall in with him again, I will make a lord of him."

The signature to this paper, which with others, including a large letter-book, and a complete list of the English Navy, was given to Fenimore Cooper, by a nephew of Paul Jones, and by him presented to the late Henry Brevoort, was torn off by a vandal autograph seeker who was enjoying Mr. Brevoort's hospitality.

Such scraps, and I only mention these because they are close at hand, prove the value which may attach to a frag-

ment of manuscript in making up our estimate of historical characters.

The ethnology of the races that preceded us as possessors of this continent, must be the object of careful study, and memorials of their unwritten history must be sought for, to be preserved and compared in a collection which we hope to begin when we have our own building. The language, habits, migrations and mutual relations of the Indian tribes, must be investigated and recorded, in anticipation of a future Lyard or Rawlinson, a Long Islander we hope, and a member of the Long Island Historical Society.

The geographical position we occupy has an all-important influence on our history, as on that of all nations. From the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Lakes, there is hardly a mile of desert land. Excepting Wethersfield, in Connecticut, which has some little Saharas of its own, that have been turned to account, however, by onion growers, we can hardly name a sterile district of any extent. Prof. Guyot assures us that there is just enough desert here to serve as a *cabinet specimen*.

Our lakes, rivers and mountains seem placed by Providence in the position best calculated to make one nation of us all. Even the Hollanders, who settled these New Netherlands, penetrated the country to a greater distance from the sea than ever a Dutchman did before. To be sure they could do it without the labor of walking, a labor indeed, if

the garments they wore are correctly described by Diedrich Knickerbocker. The rich bottoms of the Mohawk, easily reached by sailing up the Hudson, were too tempting, and were early planted by the Holland settlers.

Imagine the Alleghanies running east and west, or the Mississippi discharging itself into the Lakes or the ocean—what a different history would ours be! Were it a land like Mexico, or portions of Africa—a high table land—we should have had no navigable rivers, and consequently no steamboats; with a climate so dry as to be unfavorable to agriculture; with clashing interests, and perhaps distinctly drawn national lines, as in the case of the Hebrews and Phœnicians. Africa has a long coast line, without deep mediterranean seas and gulfs, and but few navigable rivers. See the effect of these on Europe and on us. A nation scattered on small and widely-separated islands has no history, as witness the Polynesians. Nations settled on peninsulas, as Greece and Rome, Denmark and Scandinavia, make *too much* history for their own or their neighbors' comfort. A nation living on a large island, near a continent, is liable to constant invasions, as Great Britain, successively invaded and conquered by Saxons, Danes and Normans, and subject to be much terrified by the threats of an invasion, be it from a Bonaparte or a Fenian.

The desire of the artist is to preserve, in a permanent form, a pleasing and effective representation of a natural or artificial scene or object. The key word of this definition

is the term pleasing, which is a quality that varies as the eye and the mind are more or less trained and skilled in artistic judgment. A healthful education of this last faculty will develop a new sense, which is affected through the medium of vision, in the same manner as music impresses the same sense through the organ of hearing. The constant study of works pronounced excellent by those who have already acquired this standard of judgment, will implant this sense in all who are not purposely obtuse or indifferent to a feeling for the beautiful.

With the formation of public galleries, such a taste will become a civilizing influence, with a humanizing effect; which in the case of Grecian art, and Roman imitation of it, was not so apparent, because its cultivation probably was confined to an upper class, and to only a few centres of empire; or because it was principally exercised in the erection of proud architectural monuments, or in the production of statues of imaginary and gross deities, without a Christian inspiration or a purely poetical sentiment to give meaning to them.

Our Society has collected many fine works that represent art in all its varied developments; and these are beginning to be appreciated, and are creating an interest among our members that cannot fail to be lasting and profitable. When our sister Society, which directs its efforts to the encouragement of art only, has a local habitation, we may properly transfer the sapling we are training, to their exclusive guardianship and care.

In the early and tribal existence of a race, when war is perpetual between small nations, and their traditions relate merely to personal feats of valor, or to success won by stratagem, there is no history, properly so called. There is a mere record of detached events, which after the lapse of ages become fabulous and mythological in their narration and are added to and embellished by the poets, troubadours or skalds, who alone are the depositaries of such history. Historians proper do not appear, until the events to be narrated have some bearing on those which preceded or followed them, and only then do we understand the logical sequence of men's acts as a body or community, under the title of a nation.

It is, however, at even a later stage than this that men begin to require more detail, and seek to unveil the so-called secret history of a people, that is, the causes or influences which originated or directed a certain course of action leading to known results. This kind of historical narration generally takes the form of memoirs or biographies. The Ancients have left us few of these histories. They began to multiply with the invention of printing, and now admirably illustrate the more general works of the historian proper. In Europe such by ways of history may be found in manuscript, to be consulted by those interested in procuring true and connected narratives, and may never be printed. We have on our shelves a French work, in one hundred and thirty-one volumes, of such memoirs, printed from authentic

manuscripts by the French government, for the use of historians and the delight of the deep reader.

Of varied but often of local interest only are the detailed histories of cities, towns and counties, genealogical memoirs and the smaller biographical sketches, which are multiplying rapidly both in Europe and in this country. These minor records, however unpretending, may interest many who by birth or by residence have become identified with these places; while assisting the researches of the conscientious and pains-taking historian. These plain and homely annals link and endear the past to the present, while they put us on our good behavior by reminding us that a note may be made of our most trifling acts, affecting our good name in the memory of those who alone perhaps will know that we ever lived.

This is but an imperfect review of the objects which a Historical Society must continually keep before it; but the time that we have to pass here together is brief, and your patience must not be tried by following each subject through all the ramifications which its mere enunciation suggests.

Much matter for history is, no doubt, yet to be made by us as Americans, and we shall, I trust, have long periods of peace in which it may be written. We have provided much material for history in the few years of our existence as a nation; and it cannot be said of us, as of the *newly knifed-grinder*, or of those nations that live and die without leaving more than a name, that we have no history *to tell*.

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